



Family Fitness: Don't Exercise... Play!

For generations, school children impatiently anticipated outdoor recess and after school fun. But today nature, with all her adventures, must compete with television, video games and the Internet for our children's attention. This change in childhood activities is affecting our nation's health:

- The prevalence of overweight among children aged 6-11 has more than doubled in the past 20 years, increasing from 7% in 1980 to 18.8% in 2004.¹
- Overweight and obesity increase the risk of diabetes, high blood pressure, high cholesterol, asthma, arthritis, and poor health status.²
- Physical inactivity increases the risk of dying prematurely, dying of heart disease, and developing diabetes, colon cancer, and high blood pressure.³

Clearly it's time to find ways for parents to help their kids develop more active lifestyles. Here are some ways to make physical activity a regular part of your child's day.

Just Have Fun

For adults, getting enough exercise is often a chore. "I have to go work out" doesn't sound like much fun, does it? Instead of presenting physical activity as something your children should do, consider it play and make it inviting. Biking, skating, and neighborhood games like tag will get your kids' hearts pumping and be loads of fun.

When it comes to sports, don't hamper your child's enjoyment by insisting he or she performs up to a certain standard. Children will ask for instruction when they want to know how to do something better, and they'll let you know just how much coaching they want. Focus on having fun and don't let parental lectures or pressures become a deterrent.

Exercise Together – Early and Often!

One of the best ways to foster good exercise habits is to make fun physical activity something your family does together, and you can establish family exercise habits even before your kids are walking! Hiking with the baby in a pack or pushing your toddler on a trike can lay the foundation for associating activity with fun and family.

Once your little one is mobile, try "follow the leader" around your neighborhood or at the local playground. You can incorporate running, hopping, skipping and more, the sillier the better. Just watch out – you might have trouble keeping up when it's your child's turn to lead!

As your kids grow and their schedules fill up with school and extracurricular activities, make a point of scheduling family time after work or school and on weekends. Plan regular hikes, games and active adventures, choosing things your children enjoy to keep their interest level high. Be prepared to switch gears mid-game, since many children like to bounce from one thing to another.

Organize Active Play Dates and Parties

Invite your children's friends to join the fun! Organize get-togethers that include skating, swimming, bowling or hiking. It's a great way to celebrate a birthday, or just to make an afternoon special. When your child has friends over on a weekend, resist the temptation to head to the video store to rent movies. Instead, provide skates, kites and a bike ride to the park. If you meet with resistance, add a video camera to the mix and let them film each other clowning around or showing off – it's a temptation few kids can resist!

Attitude Is Everything

Organized sports are a natural choice for introducing healthy exercise into your child's life, and being part of a team can be an enriching experience. But if you pressure your child to win or are critical of his or her play, you may take the fun right out of the game. So keep it positive.

(The “praise sandwich” is a good technique for positive skill development, in which you couch constructive criticism with praise and encouragement. For example: “That was a great swing, Jessie. This time, keep your eye on the ball. You’re doing a great job!”)

Also, remember that your child won’t necessarily take to *your* choice of sport or activity. Some kids love to be part of a team, some are more comfortable with individual sports, such as swimming, gymnastics or martial arts, and others don’t like competitive sports at all. Non-competitive activities, like dancing and hiking provide plenty of exercise, too.

Foster a love of physical activity by encouraging your children to try different things and discover what they like best. Positively reinforce your child’s physical activity, whether she’s the star of her soccer team or just loves to dance the afternoon away in her bedroom. Making exercise an enjoyable part of your family’s life will improve the physical health of your kids and you, *and* it will likely strengthen family ties along the way.

**Call anytime, day or night, at (866) EAP-4SOC,
Or visit online at eap4soc.mhn.com.**

This article is for informational and self-help purposes only. It should not be treated as a substitute for financial, medical, psychiatric, psychological or behavioral healthcare advice, or as a substitute for consultation with a qualified professional.

¹ Ogden CL, Carroll MD, Curtin LR, McDowell MA, Tabak CJ, Flegal KM. Prevalence of overweight and obesity in the United States, 1999-2004. *Journal of the American Medical Association* 2006;295(13): 1549-1555.

² Mokdad AH, Ford ES, Bowman BA, et al. Prevalence of obesity, diabetes, and obesity-related health risk factors, 2001. *Journal of the American Medical Association* 2003;289(1):76-79.

³ CDC. Physical activity and health: A report of the Surgeon General. Atlanta, GA: U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, 1996.